

Are You President's PR-service or News Agency? Petro Poroshenko's Visits Coverage by Ukrainian Local News Sites

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In new media era traditional functions of journalism (government control and criticism, formation of public opinion) are changing. Ukrainian news sites have become a platform for popular topics reprint. Journalists don't provide context, balance to the information, which is spread by PR-services. This study uses content analysis, made on the basis of two prominent Odessa news sites in order to discover the manner of the Ukrainian president's visits coverage. Both loyal and opposing to the present Ukrainian president news media, reprint main messages gained during press-conferences or from press releases, and rarely seek exclusive information or own newsbreaks (30-46% of texts had similar newsbreaks). Local news sites gave preference to president's messages transmission (60% of texts contained president's quotes and only 3 publications had experts' commentaries). Local journalists also wrote about the president's promises, compliments to Odessa inhabitants, his appreciation of work of the local authorities, but didn't add any

analysis. Such coverage doesn't appeal to readers who perceive themselves as members of civil society, but to people, who prefer fast acquaintance with popular topics on the internet.

Keywords: internet-journalism, local news sites, functions of journalism

Introduction

In modern Ukraine, where situation in journalism is improving slowly after Euromaidan, there are still unsolved problems with professional standards violations and the culture of media ownership. According to international organizations reports (Facing Reality after Euromaidan, 2016, Media Sustainability Index, 2016), compliance with professional standards level in Ukrainian media is decreasing comparatively to the times of Yanukovych (Media Sustainability Index, 2016, p. 5). And despite enactment of the law about media ownership transparency in 2015, informational policy of the majority of Ukrainian media is reported to be dependent on political or business interests of third parties (Yeremenko, 2014).

These problems can be explained by the Soviet past of Ukrainian press, where journalism and state propaganda were considered as equal, but the era of new media influences media content as well. Giving wide opportunities to news gathering and publications promotion, new technologies affect the quality of journalistic texts.

Meanwhile Ukrainian local news sites can be interesting material to discover this situation. Nowadays these media are a popular tool for local politicians to promote their interests (especially during election campaigns). Financial hardships make editorial offices seek new ways of money saving (as a rule norms of materials publishing increase, while the number of journalists decreases). As a result, the audience gets bad-quality content and doesn't have an adequate picture of political life in the country. Such crucial topics for a democratic state as elections, reforms, actions of the President, the government (national and local) are not covered in an appropriate way, so people can't have enough information for voting and other civil activities.

To discover this problem more deeply, coverage of the Presi-

dent's visits to Odessa by local news media was analyzed. One of the largest cities in Ukraine, which has the biggest sea trade port and (after Crimea annexation) Navy base, Odessa also has a unique media landscape because of its size. There are 40 local TV and radio stations, about 550 registered print media and approximately 50 new sites (Vasina, 2015). Despite this number of mass media, the main source of information about local affairs for Odessa region inhabitants is central TV channels (The Level of People's Trust to the Different Information Sources and News, 2016). In the fight for readers local Odessa news sites use scandalous headlines and crime stories and try to be faster than their competitors. As a result, reprints from social networks and press releases are widely spread, and politicians (both national and local ones) have an advantage as recognizable and powerful news sources, in news agenda precisely national and local authorities dominate, so mass media become a useful base to share their PR messages (Steblyna, 2014).

Local journalism in the age of new media

Jeremy Iggers once mentioned that technologies were crucial for changes in newsrooms (1999, p. 76). His thought about focusing on look instead of content correlates with Baudrillard's "orbital information" – information without any sense, data that should be provided in order to fill emptiness (1997, p. 83). J. Iggers wrote about newspapers, but his observation is also true for internet-media, where news must be provided 24 hours a day. In the situation of readers number scanning, editors gain more arguments for the market oriented way of reporting, which was also mentioned by J. Iggers (1999, p. 81-82).

One more result of new technologies is so called "screen culture", Jan van Dijk predicts "replacement of text on paper, of separate audio and of direct physical transmission of signs in face-to-face communication" (2006, p. 194). For journalism it means changes in news gathering, in the centrality of screens they can gain information on the internet without going to a certain place and speaking with certain people.

However, in the age of new media, where global seems to be as available as local, qualitative information about local affairs remains to be crucial for democracy as it was decades ago (Nilsen, 2015, p. 2). Being one of the popular channels of local information, internet journalism transforms this local information, it is not traditional “forum for ideas”, but something else.

The internet seemed to be revolutionary for changes, common people with their bright ideas were reported to have a possibility to influence mass media agenda. Whereas it was discovered by Linda Jean Kenix, that blogs rarely use alternative sources, blogs agenda is linked to prominent mass media issues (2009, p. 807-808). Having a possibility to use a variety of sources, news sites are also strongly connected with these issues. Our findings show that in the age of new media it's local authorities who stay to be the main heroes in internet journalists' publications (Steblyna, 2014). So James Lull's thesis about information hegemony remains true nowadays (2000).

This authorities' favoritism of local news media can't be explained only by traditional interconnections between journalists and the government (Tenscher's information-publicity exchange (2004). Journalists do depend on political information because they don't generate their own content. The percentage of exclusive information in local internet media as well as in national ones is dramatically low. Our previous research showed the connection between the quantity of news published a day, and the percentage of exclusive news, gathered by a journalist himself. The lower is the number, the higher is the percentage of exclusiveness. So there are 3-17% of exclusive news on Ukrainian regional sites (Steblyna, 2015). And according to Nick Davis, this is true not only for Ukraine, but for some renowned international mass media (2011).

Ukrainian local news sites publish from 40 to 100 texts a day. In order to gain this quantity and to publish news faster than competitors, journalists don't only lend newsbreaks, but large quotes from press-releases, social network accounts, blogs etc. Nick Davis called

this “press realism” (2011). In Ukrainian local media we also have examples of newspaper issues that contain only two publications, written by journalists, the rest are reprints from other media, press-releases and so on (Vasylyk, 2015). So if we speak about the formation of public opinion, it might be shaped not by journalists, but political headquarters.

Ukrainian local media and formation of public opinion

Ukraine, unlike Post-Soviet Central Asian states (Olivier & Graham, 2011), has a pre-Soviet tradition of local newspapers functioning since the 18th century. However, the modern system of local press was founded in the Soviet era, it was strictly centralized and used for propaganda purposes. Also it was financed by the state. It means that Ukrainian local press doesn't have the tradition of independent reporting (the law about denationalization of newspapers with local authorities as owners was passed a year ago), as well as money earning. In addition, weak advertisement market can't be a stable source of financing, so the main source of money for Ukrainian journalists (both national and local) is the employer. Journalism as a business is not usually profitable in Ukraine, so owners often use their media for PR purposes. And there is also a weak tradition of local news reading, people prefer national media as a source of information about local affairs (The Level of People's Trust to the Different Information Sources and News, 2016), but national media have a lot of gaps in such issues coverage, some of them prefer to publish only scandals and crime stories. So for Ukrainian local media we can use M. Ferrier's term “news desert” (2013), but unlike the USA, which was analyzed by the researcher, Ukraine does have a lot of media (inherited from the Soviet era), meanwhile people in regions don't have enough information about local affairs.

This “news desert” can be described by the analysis of significant local issues coverage, such as President's visits to various regions of the country. As A. W. Barret and J. S. Peake pointed out, this topic is extremely newsworthy, whereas “presidential domestic trips consist entirely of pseudoevents” (2007, p. 6). So in theory local

journalists should fulfill traditional functions of control and critics, the formation of public opinion etc., but in reality this issue “receives extensive and predominantly positive coverage from the local media” (Barret & Peake 2007, p. 6).

President’s visits to Odessa and their context

Odessa has been one of the most visited cities during Petro Poroshenko’s presidency. Among other regions are Lviv (in the west of the country), Kharkiv (in the east, near Donbas) and Donetsk region. After Crimea annexation and the war in Donbas Odessa was perceived as a risky region because of strong pro-Russian influence in the city in the past. In addition the industrial potential of the region, the Navy base and the commercial port were also important in the context of reforms, initiated after Euromaidan. From 2014 to 2016 there were 9 president’s official visits, with the biggest number – 5 visits – in 2015. Two trips in 2014 and 2015 were made on Ukrainian Independence day and a day after (the 24th and 25th of August) and this fact correlates with the tendency to show Odessa as a Ukrainian patriotic city (in contrast to the messages “Odessa is a Russian city”, “Odessa is Novorossia” and “Odessa wants to speak Russian” in the times of Yanukovych). Poroshenko also came to the city on the 10th of April in 2015 (it’s the Day of liberation from the fascists) and on the 3rd of July in 2016 (the Navy day). Those visits can be considered as an attempt to link the city with the military tasks of the country as well as revive its old naval traditions. Several visits were directly connected with reforms and the appointment of some new figures among local authorities (the 25th of August 2015 – introduction of the new police, the 30th of May 2015 – appointment of Micheil Saakashvili, the 16th of October 2015 – opening of the Citizen Service center and the appointment of the new Customs chief). Two more visits on the 8th of July 2015 and on the 7th of October 2016 were devoted to transport problems (the construction of Odessa – Reni highway and the announcement of Ukraine – Bulgaria transport corridor). And during the first Poroshenko’s trip to Odessa his political program was presented.

So all those visits had powerful PR-messages and were aimed to show president's care and his acknowledgment of problems in Odessa.

Method

This study uses content analysis, conducted on the basis of two prominent Odessa news sites: dumskaya.net and reporter.com.ua. Both these media have owners who influence their information policy: Oleksiy Goncharenko (in 2014 he was elected to the Verkhovna Rada, he also is the member of Petro Poroshenko's party) and Sergey Kivalov (he was elected to the Verkhovna Rada for several times, nowadays he is the head of the Ukrainian sea party). Both politicians were former members of the Party of regions and supported ex-president V. Yanukovich.

All publications, which were published during present Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko's visits to Odessa, were analyzed. The sources of information, popular topics of publications were studied in the texts (70 texts on both sites in total).

Findings

News sites covered Poroshenko's visits with solid attention, dumskaya.net published 42 texts, reporter.com.ua – 28 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

the year	2014		2015						2016	total
the date	24. 08	23. 10	10. 04	30. 05	08. 07	25. 08	16. 10	03. 07	07. 10	
dumskaya.net	0	4	10	1	7	4	6	4	6	42
reporter.com.ua	1	3	8	2	3	2	3	3	3	28

The visit, which gained the most detailed coverage on both sites was the third visit (the 10th of April 2015), the sites published 10 and 8 news about it respectively. 40% of Dumskaya's and 60% of Report-

er's texts were written mentioning the reporter who was on the scene.

“Dumskaya’s” attention to the topic could also be explained by its owner’s participation in the president’s visits. Journalists tried to mention this fact as well as publish photos with Goncharenko in the background, Goncharenko also gave commentaries about the presidential visits for his site. The Reporter’s owner on the contrary is not so loyal to Poroshenko – there was only one publication, that included Kivalov’s commentary about the president.

Despite the differences 13 texts about the visits on both sites had similar newsbreaks and reflected prominent PR-messages: the presidents’ guaranties of safety, positive tendencies in the implementation of reforms, the president’s care for the military etc. It means that even an opposing editorial policy can’t resist the president’s PR-service’s will to promote their leader.

Information sources

Quotes in the materials about visits were calculated (Figure 2), the majority of texts contained quotes, which belonged to the President (60%), 39% texts were with quotes of local officials and PR-services (city and region council, police, Navy, frontier guard) and 20% were texts with quotes of other mass-media, local businessmen. And only three quotes belonged to experts.

This means that local media give preference to the president’s messages transmission and don’t care for the wider context (only loyal or neutral officials are quoted). The reaction of the experts or even common people, who gain some preferences, is not interesting for the media. So the traditional Soviet way of government-people communication is reflected in these materials: the government speaks, the people remain silent and grateful.

President’s prominent messages reflection

President’s promises, compliments to the Odessa military and Odessa inhabitants, his evaluation of the work of the local authorities were mentioned in journalists’ materials more often than other topics (Figure 3).

Figure 2

	president	officials, PR-services	media	businessmen	military	experts	without quotes
dumskaya.net	24	15	3	1	1	0	5
reporter.com.ua	18	12	0	1	0	3	0

Figure 3

	promises	compliments	evaluation	citizens appeals
dumskaya.net	10	8	9	5
reporter.com.ua	9	8	6	2

So the journalists preferred to write about the presidents' promises, but didn't control their execution, these promises were published without any analysis – journalists just copied words, prepared by the president's speechwriters. The exchange of compliments, which is so popular if we speak about the guests of the city, helped to show the president's special attitude towards Odessa inhabitants. And the evaluation of the work done by the local authorities showed the president as a strong and demanding leader. Whereas citizen appeals and communication with common people were not often reflected, it is an interesting detail, because this feature could create an image of an open-minded president, who has people's trust. However, there was only one publication in which quotes of both president and a common individual, who gained aid from president, were used. Other texts contained only president's quotes, rarely – quotes of Poroshenko and local authorities.

Conclusions

Nowadays transformations in mass-media are perceived in both optimistic and pessimistic ways. Social networks, new technol-

ologies give a lot of possibilities for common people to improve their country. However, the term 'digital gap' should be recalled. Jan van Dijk writes that it is not so much about access to technologies, people could have gadgets, but the question is: what options do they use (2006)? Journalists of news sites have a big variety of opportunities to check information on line, to find alternative sources etc., but they don't use them.

Ukrainian local news sites demonstrate a tendency to move from "forums of ideas" to areas for gathering information about popular topics. Being dependent on marketing aims, the owners' will, the need to publish news faster than competitors and to fulfill the daily norm etc., news sites don't seem to deal with such communicative strategies as government control and critics, establishing social dialogue. Such internet journalists' wish just to repeat popular topics or quotes (without checking or adding context) could indicate the beginning of transformations in news gathering influenced by the internet. And if modern internet-journalism (as well as newspapers and TV) can't implement these traditional social functions, we should seek new areas where they are achieved. The Arab Spring and Euromaidan in Ukraine showed examples of the formation of civil society in countries with low level of the freedom of speech and journalism, controlled by the state or oligarchs. What if the development of civil society is not journalists' duty anymore? As J. Iggers said: "Subscribing to a newspaper was traditionally motivated, in part, by a sense of civic duty to be informed. If costumers no longer fill that duty, it may be at least in part because newspapers no longer address them as citizens" (1999, p. 86).

Such important topics for a democratic society as reforms, government control and criticism, and, as it was discovered, the president's official visits, are not also covered for the readers. This information about visits doesn't have past (context) and future (analysis of effects for a city or a country). It is as instant and fluent as a link in a social net. However, those new communication strategies are

very convenient for PR-services, which can use internet-media as a platform for sharing their messages. For civil society it means a need for its own representatives, who will use this possibility in order to be noticed.

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Пресс-службы Президента или информационные агентства: или Как украинские местные сайты освещали визиты П. Порошенко

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Во времена новых медиа традиционные функции журналистики (контроль и критика власти, формирования общественного мнения) трансформируются. Украинские новостные сайты становятся платформами для перепечатывания популярных тем. Журналисты редко дают контекст, сбалансированную информацию, полагаясь на те сведения, которые им предоставляют пресс-службы. В статье на основании контент-анализа исследуется подача визитов украинского Президента новостными медиа (двумя популярными местными сайтами Одессы). Как лояльный, как и оппозиционный к Президенту сайт перепечатывают информацию, полученную во время пресс-конференций или из пресс-релизов, редко ищут эксклюзивную информацию или собственные новостные поводы (30-46% текстов имеют одинаковые новостные поводы). Местные сайты отдают предпочтение распространению сообщений Президента (60% текстов содержат цитаты Президента и только в трех публикациях есть комментарии экспертов). Местные журналисты

также пишут об обещаниях президента, о комплиментах, которые он делает Одессе и одесситам, его оценку работы местной власти, но не добавляют никакого анализа. Такая подача информации не ориентирована на читателей-представителей гражданского общества, скорее, она предназначена для тех, кто предпочитает быстрое ознакомление с популярными темами, которые появились в сети.

Ключевые слова: интернет-журналистика, местные новостные сайты, функции журналистики.

Прес-служби Президента чи інформаційні агенства: або Як українські місцеві сайти висвітлювали візити П. Порошенка

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У часи нових медіа традиційні функції журналістики (контроль та критика влади, формування громадської думки) трансформуються. Українські новинні сайти стають платформами для передруків популярних тем. Журналісти зрідка дають контекст, збалансовану інформацію, покладаючись на ті відомості, які їм надають прес-служби. У статті на основі контент-аналізу досліджується подача візитів українського Президента новинними медіа (двома популярними місцевими сайтами Одеси). Як лояльний, так і опозиційний до Президента сайт передруковують інформацію, яка була отримана під час прес-конференцій або з прес-релізів, рідко шукають ексклюзивну інформацію або власні інформаційні приводи (30-46% текстів мають однакові інформаційні приводи). Місцеві сайти надають перевагу розповсюдженню повідомлень Президента (60% текстів містять цитати Президента і тільки у трьох публікаціях є коментарі експертів). Місцеві журналісти також пишуть про обіцянки президента, про компліменти, які він робить Одесі та одеситам, про його оцінки діяльності місцевої влади, але не додають ніякого аналізу. Така подача інформації не орієнтована на читачів-представників громадянського суспільства, швидше, вона призначається для тих, хто сподівається на швидке ознайомлення із популярними темами, які з'явилися у мережі.

Ключові слова: інтернет-журналістика, місцеві новинні сайти, функції журналістики.

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